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ABSTRACT

Mentoring has a mystique that only good can come from it, that at the worst, mentoring programs will not accomplish all that they could, but the youth served will at least be better for the experience. Both impact and process evaluations are needed to answer questions about the real benefits and any potential adverse effects of mentoring. The recent evaluation by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation of the national Career Beginnings program does indicate beneficial effects on educational aspirations and college attendance for average students who were not at very high risk. Project RAISE, in Baltimore (Maryland), a program to reduce the dropout rate of high-risk students, provides another example of program evaluation (conducted by McPartland and Nettles, 1991) that demonstrates that school attendance is a behavior that mentors can influence positively. Studies of the process of mentoring have suggested that the right kind of receptive youth can be benefitted by the right kind of motivated and trained mentors. However, research has generally not accounted for the impact of how a program is implemented. Research needs to investigate program implementation and the fit between the mentor and the youth. Good evaluations can help program managers understand and replicate this fit. Information collected about the mentor and the youth can highlight the relationship, participants' perceptions and assessments of the relationship, and obstacles and problems that stand in the way of a gratifying and useful relationship. Evaluation of mentoring programs needs to concentrate on the relationship between the mentor and the youth. (SLD)

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Evaluating Mentoring Programs

WHY EVALUATE?

As with many youth services, we know very little about the execution of mentoring programs and the effect of mentoring on youth. Although we assume that mentoring will benefit the youth—improve their sense of self, and overcome the damaging or limiting influences of their homes and communities—we really do not know how, or how much, and what in their lives it will affect. Many parts of society are developing the capacity and will to provide mentoring services to youth, but, paradoxically, the strong motivation to help may be inhibiting us from seriously examining the help we are offering.

Given the chance to spend money to evaluate a youth program or to provide more services, most program administrators would not choose the evaluation. They would rather use funds to reach more youth, recruit and train more mentors, increase the front-line staff, or provide more experiences for the youth. People who design and run youth programs are service-oriented and identify strongly with their clients. Many of them may also be afraid that a rigorous evaluation of their program before it has had a chance to operate will jeopardize it. They frequently will support an evaluation only when they feel it will demonstrate the program's success and help them get more support.

Although understandable, such thinking is short-sighted. Program administrators need to become more self-conscious and self-reflective about how well they are providing mentoring help to their clients. Program funders need to be sure that they are supporting programs with goals that can be met. And, beyond the interest of any one program, social policy makers need to be able to compare the effects of various kinds of efforts to help youth, like mentoring, education and training, and community service, and to determine the costs and benefits of each of these interventions.

Mentoring has a mystique that only good can come from it, that nothing can go wrong, that at the worst the programs will not accomplish all that they could, but that the youth will at least be better for the experience even if they cannot say that it has markedly affected their lives. But mentoring can be harmful. It can disillusion both the mentor and the youth who might not enter into such a relationship again. It can make youth cynical about yet another program which promises more than it can deliver or is irrelevant to their lives. It can frustrate mentors who have difficulties in reaching the youth, and feel abandoned by the youth whom they are volunteering to help and by the program staff who do not provide sufficient support and guidance. And it can disillusion social planners if they feel that mentoring has been oversold as a youth development strategy.

WHAT KINDS OF EVALUATIONS ARE NEEDED?

Impact Evaluations

Evaluations of the impact of mentoring can answer questions like, "Does mentoring work?," "Which kinds of mentoring (or models) are effective?," "What does it affect?," and "Which youth can most profit from it?"

But answering these questions about mentoring can be problematic. Because many programs have been in operation for only a year or two at most, evaluators of the outcomes of a mentoring program have to decide whether the program has existed long enough to have measurable results. They also have to determine whether they are looking for short-term results for the youth, like higher test scores, better school attendance, or fewer anti-social acts, or for long-term results, like sustained academic improvement and educational persistence over time.

Because evaluations of the impact of mentoring can compare youth who have received mentoring program services with those who have not, collecting various kinds of data (e.g., grades and test scores) allows us to determine the amount, significance, and direction of the impact of a particular program. Such evaluations can be used to ascertain whether a particular program or model should continue to be supported and whether formal mentoring itself can significantly affect the youth it was designed to help.

Process Evaluations

To know more about the impact of mentoring on the youth we need evaluations of the process of mentoring, but right now we have little more than impressionistic information about how mentoring programs are implemented. Good process evaluations can provide information for improving the program by changing some practices, for taking a different course, and even for changing how the program is being implemented. Such evaluations do not directly explain the effects of the program,

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either short-term or long-term; they reveal what is happening in the program that can contribute to these effects.

Process evaluations can give mentoring professionals answers to such important questions as: "Which youth should be mentored by the program?," "Which mentors will be effective and stay in the program?," "What kind of support should the program provide to the mentor and the youth?," "How should the program be managed and organized?" Behind all these operational concerns is a simple evaluation research question, although one difficult to answer: "Which causes or processes working alone or working together bring into being a mentoring relationship that provides the necessary social and developmental opportunities for at-risk youth?" To answer this question we need good data collection and record keeping within the project, participant or outsider observation, or case histories. We particularly need these data now because the current hoopla about what goes on in these programs, coming from dramatic anecdote, unconfirmed impressions, or casual observation, does nothing to help planners or administrators implement or defend their ideas or programs.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT THE IMPACT OF MENTORING?

Two recent evaluations, of the national Career Beginnings program and Project RAISE, suggest the directions of the impact of planned mentoring on youth.

Career Beginnings

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation conducted a national evaluation of the impact of Career Beginnings, which was designed to assist "tenacious" high school juniors from low-income families to complete high school and be admitted to a two- or four-year college, or, for the non-college-bound youth, to find jobs that develop their abilities (Cave and Quint, 1990). In the study the participating youth were randomly assigned to the program to receive all the Career Beginnings services (experimentals), or to a control group who would receive no formal program services but were free to get help in the school or community under natural conditions. The random assignment guaranteed that the two groups were comparable.

The Career Beginnings program at each of the sites had some common features and provided some common services: collaboration among a local college or university (acting as the program sponsor), the public schools, and the business community; summer jobs for the youth between their junior and senior years; workshops in the summer and during the year on matters related to applying for college; college and career counseling; and mentors from the community (not friends or family) to serve as role models or to assist the youth in making future plans. Each site implemented these services in its own way. The controls were likely exposed to many of these services, but outside the Career Beginnings program. During their senior year of high school the controls received more support services than was anticipated by the program planners, although again the youth in the program received even more, but only by a small amount.

Both the program youth and the controls attended college at a higher rate than expected, given their somewhat disadvantaged background, but, importantly, the Career Beginnings program participants attended college at a greater rate and had higher educational aspirations. Moreover, the program youth were more likely to begin college on schedule than the controls, although the same percentage of both groups persisted in college during their freshman year.

These findings are suggestive. Very important, support services for able youth not likely to go on to college, wherever they get them, can make a difference to their college plans and persistence. In general, however, both the Career Beginnings youth and the others were good candidates for any kind of program and for support services: although they were only average students they had good school attendance records, no history of significant disciplinary problems, and, more generally, were personally motivated and committed (school service, part-time job, contributing to family income, and so forth). Clearly, we can get a good return to an investment in youth such as these.

We must not overlook that Career Beginnings is not purely a mentoring program, even though many label it as such; it offers a variety of related services to the youth, not unlike other college or career preparation programs which do not provide formal mentoring. A useful question we might ask then is, how much did the mentoring affect the youth, independent of other program services? Or a better question might be, how does mentoring become integrated and related to other services to make a more comprehensive program effective? These questions can tell us more specifically about how to employ mentoring in services to youth.

Project RAISE

The goal of Project RAISE in Baltimore, Maryland, is to reduce the dropout rate of high-risk students, beginning in the middle school, with the help of adults from the community acting as mentors or advocates. An evaluation of the effects of the program after two years of operation, conducted by McPartland and Nettles (1991), found that compared with a control group not receiving Project RAISE services the program most strongly improved the students' attendance and report card grades in English, but not their promotion rates or grades on standardized tests. Moreover, the students still had attendance and academic performance problems that put them at risk for academic failure and dropping out of school. The results of the program do, however, suggest that school attendance is a behavior mentors can easily influence, unlike promotions and grades, over which teachers have the greatest influence.

Clearly, we need evaluations of the impact and outcomes of mentoring if a particular community or the society at large is to continue to invest in it. These evaluations, however, suggest that we must be willing to accept small, short-term ac-

complishments, and not insist on major changes in the youth served by the programs.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT THE PROCESS OF MENTORING?

The Right Kind of Youth

Flaxman and Ascher (1992) in their study of a sample of mentoring programs found that, in their planning, programs can clearly differentiate the kinds of youth they want to serve—e.g., those who need some social support but who are not fundamentally at risk, or others with multiple social and psychological needs. But when it comes to implementation, program developers and managers do not always stick to the distinction. Moreover, the researchers also found that although almost all program sponsors have a clear idea of the youth they want the program to serve, they leave the decision of who will actually participate to someone else. For school-based programs, this means teachers and counselors in close proximity to the students decide who will profit from the program. And although most programs were designed for at-risk youth, "at-riskness" as a construct is often used idiosyncratically.

The distinction between (a) the kinds of youth that the program sponsors and developers have created the program to serve, and (b) the youth the program is actually serving, is important. It is important for determining what services to provide, and how to provide them, and for arriving at reasonable expectations for the program's impact. And it is important for distinguishing those who can profit from a fairly limited mentoring relationship from those who need something else in addition to the relationship.

The Right Kind of Adults to Be Mentors

Flaxman and Ascher (1992) also found that most mentors are chosen because they are available, not always because they are right for the program. They volunteer usually through a community organization or agency or business. They bring to the relationship their own intuitive styles of relating to youth. Most training is not designed to alter the mentor's intuitive styles. In programs for high-risk, poor, minority youth, mentors sometimes may even take a moralistic stance or view their role as compensatory because they are socially distant from the youth they are trying to help; they do not easily understand the worlds of the youth, and so see them as cultural or environmental abstractions rather than as individuals. The mentors may also drop out or lose interest either because they commit time they do not have or because they are not gratified by the responses they receive for the help they offer.

Mentors sometimes are also confused about what is expected of them and take on responsibilities they cannot meet. Hamilton and Hamilton (1990) in their evaluation of the implementation of Linking Up, a mentoring program in New York State, distinguish among four goals for the mentoring relationship which they view as levels on a hierarchy: (1) building a relationship, (2) introducing options to the youth, (3) building the youth's character, and (4) developing competence in the youth. They found that the mentors who felt they had to build a relationship with the youth felt they were less successful than those who concentrated on developing the youth's competence, and were the most self-critical. Mentors who engaged in a concrete activity with the youth to build his or her competence felt most satisfied with the experience. But as a group the mentors felt they needed support from the project staff, particularly to know what to do in their time with the youth.

After visits to a number of mentoring programs nationally, Freedman (1991) found that mentoring is not just the venue of the outside volunteer, that the paid front-line staff also assume mentoring roles for the youth. They actually interact with the youth more than the mentors do, certainly in school-based programs where teachers and counselors who are part of the project see the students daily. In other programs a paid youth worker is frequently the unrelated adult to whom the child and the family turn in an emergency or to solve a problem. In Career Explorations, the forerunner of Career Beginnings, the youth who were placed in summer jobs did not really distinguish among their supervisors, the program staff, and their assigned mentors from the community as helpers or mentors.

Implementing the Mentoring

Most of what we call mentoring programs are really education and training efforts or youth programs with mentor-like activities and services, as is the case with Career Beginnings, and so we must consider how the management and organization of these activities and services affect the impact of the "mentoring program." For the youth in the Career Beginnings program the differences came about because of the execution of the program, not because of the features of the program. The program had the greatest impact on the youth where the Career Beginnings model was most strongly implemented and the services best delivered (Cave and Quint, 1990). In Project RAISE all the positive effects could be linked to only three of the seven community sponsors (McPartland and Nettles, 1991). Until now research generally has not accounted for the impact of how a program is implemented on its outcome, and some people have come to feel that many programs with good designs have failed because they do not have a service vision, a service delivery system, and a distinct identity, and ignore the problems of leadership and staffing (Hahn, 1992). And Freedman (1991), after scores of semi-structured interviews with those involved with mentoring programs has concluded that mentoring dangerously lacks an infrastructure to sustain it, that it now subsists on fervor and enthusiasm.

HOW DO WE LEARN MORE ABOUT THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP?

What makes mentoring different from many other programs for youth is the mentoring relationship itself. If the essential service of a mentoring program is the mentoring, as distinct from education, training, enrichment, counseling,

and so forth, then it is the interaction of the mentor and the youth that needs to be most closely studied. Questionnaire studies alone do not help us enough to understand the true dynamics of the mentoring interaction because mentors and youth give universal and socially desirable answers to questions, rather than respond intuitively. Methods like systematic or purposeful observation are better devised for understanding the mentoring relationship. These relatively unstructured methods provide detailed descriptions of what is going on in the relationship. Instead of asking questions in a predetermined, simple, evaluative form of what is going on in a relationship, these methods gain insight and explain hypotheses and assumptions. In this way they give administrators and funders an explanation about what is going on in the relationship, which helps them decide to continue or change the course of the mentoring.

Some Particular Methods

Evaluators can observe and record agreed-upon desirable behaviors in the relationship or analyze the written records of the mentors, youth, or program staff. They can develop a checklist of desirable behaviors to observe, or identify particular characteristics to analyze in the writings of the participants in the program. The checklists explain the external, visible behaviors of the youth and the mentor; the content analysis of their writings can be used for getting at inner experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and such psychological states as anxiety, affection, and hostility (Judd, Smith, and Kidder, 1991).

Investigators can also faithfully record what they observe under more natural conditions without using checklists or coding schemes by observing the interaction as it takes place without any preconceptions about its character. However, these investigators come to the scene with particular constructs for viewing it; for example, they might assume that mentors and youth want to establish a relationship but cannot do so easily because they are so socially distant. The observers use these "lenses" to analyze recurring events, themes, and explanations in the scene, or to change lenses when what they observe suggests other perspectives (Judd, et al.).

The Mentoring Fit

A particularly important but unacknowledged problem in mentoring programs is the "fit" between the mentor and the youth. Good evaluations can help program managers locate this fit. The evaluators can help them learn more about the mentor's motivation and mentoring style, the experiences of the youth in the relationship, and the quality of the relationship itself. They should especially help to help managers learn more about the youth's experiences in the program. The youth have more knowledge about their past and present needs and desires and have a greater investment in the service they are receiving than the program staff, the funders, or even the mentors themselves.

We can learn more about the youth's experiences by using a few simple strategies. Information can be collected about the mentor and the youth at the screening stage. During the program their interaction can be evaluated through open-ended interviews with the mentor and the youth together and separately. This allows us to observe them in action in the relationship but also lets them establish their own observation and assessment of it. The case on a particular relationship (and relationships in the program generally) can be thickened and enhanced by conducting focus groups of mentors and youth meeting together and in separate groups as well. This, again, will give us the experience and the reality behind the bare records of the mentors' and youths' participation. Finally, we can observe the mentors and the youth in their interaction with each other. This will give us the opportunity to see some of the events that are important to learning about the effect of the mentors and youth's expectations, desires, and perceptions of their needs and the ways they relate to each other. This would illuminate the stumbling blocks and problems that stand in the way of a gratifying or useful relationship. And the relationship is what mentoring is about.

— Erwin Flaxman

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